Reframing General Education

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ABSTRACT

From the colonial colleges to the present-day flagship universities, the undergraduate general education curriculum has dramatically shifted from a single, faculty-prescribed, general program to a diverse array of elective, student-choice-driven, specialized programs of general studies. This transformation has also encouraged, if not established, faculty specialization, disciplinary departments, and through research, the production of "new knowledge." The general education curriculum has served as a dynamic "locus and transmitter" of student, faculty, and administrative as well as external social, cultural, economic, and governmental educational values and aspirations. While the contemporary general education curriculum has been comparatively static, general education represents a balance—or at least a stalemate, depending on one's perspective—of these often competing interests. While much has been written about general education, the enormity and complexity of the subject proves difficult for just a single theory to yield meaningful analysis and interpretation. Handily, Lee G. Bolman and Terrance E. Deal's *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* dissuades a single theoretical perspective in favor of a multifaceted analysis and interpretation; and when applied to general education, it allows a great deal of flexibility, and a number of useful themes emerge.

Keywords: Bolman and Deal, reframing general education

Concisely, general education has been defined as the "structure and substance" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 4) of a college or university, but such brevity belies the complexity and the comparative diversity of general education.[1] Perhaps a more pragmatic approach would be to identify general education as "a broad introduction to the principal academic disciplines or fields of research with their current methods and findings" (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 909) or, even more simply, as the "courses within a distribution schema that all students must pass as a requirement for graduation" (Warner & Koeppel, 2009, p. 241). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has comprehensively defined general education as "that part of a liberal education curriculum that is shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing essential intellectual, civic, and practical capacities. General education can take many forms, and increasingly includes introductory, advanced, and integrative forms of learning" (2015). And therein lies the paradox of general education: conceptually, general education is designed to encapsulate what every college student and subsequent graduate should know to be considered well educated; and yet, general education remains a vastly diverse, institutionally specific endeavor. After all, general education "is possibly the most important manifestation of an institution's educational mission" (AAC&U, 2015). Even if general education is reduced to being "the tiresome task of passing on some fund of information" (Wallace, 1983, p. 258), it is also the intersection of an ever-shifting, oft competing, and occasionally contradictory set of values and interests. A purely epistemological examination of the "structure and substance" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 4) of general education cannot accommodate all of its complexities and diverse manifestations. Perhaps, general education can be better understood through the novel study of organizational theory.

Theoretical Framework

In Lee G. Bolman and Terrance E. Deal's *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (1991, 2008), the authors "consolidated the major schools of organizational thought into four perspectives" or "frames" (1991, p. 11). Frames in this sense "are both windows on the world and lenses that bring the world into focus. Frames filter out some things while allowing others to pass through easily. Frames help us to order experience and decide what action to take" (p. 11). The focus of their theory was to not limit analysis to a single theoretical approach but, rather, provided a means for multifaceted analysis and interpretation of complex and contentious problems: "Every manager, consultant, or policymaker uses a personal frame or image of organizations to gather information, make judgments, and determine how best to get things

done. The more artistic among them were able to frame and reframe experience, sorting through the tangled underbrush to find solutions to problems" (p. 11). In other words, any given problem may naturally lend itself to or has conventionally been understood through a particular theoretical approach or perspective, but the use of a single or orthodox approach may lead to the wrong or an incomplete assessment or interpretation: "The problem is seldom that the one true theory is lost among the crowd of false pretenders. Usually, the problem is that there are several valid perspectives, each of which is interesting and significant but able to arrive at only part of the truth" (p. 310).

While not explicitly a unifying theory, Bolman and Deal's (1991) four frames chiefly draw from a number of theoretical disciplines across social science theories:

- The *structural frame* draws "mainly on the discipline of sociology" (p. 15). Echoing rational systems theory (p. 9), the structural frame would suggest that structure "is created to fit an organization's environment and technology. Organizations allocate responsibilities to participants and create rules, policies, and management hierarchies to coordinate diverse activities. Problems arise when the structure does not fit the situation," necessitating reorganization (p. 15). The structural frame "emphasizes the importance of formal roles and relationships" (p. 15), and ultimately, success and failure are determined by organizational design and individuals fitting into or conforming to the structural design.
- The *human resources frame* emanates from the work of "organizational social psychologists" (p. 15) and emphasizes "the interdependence between people and organizations" in an attempt to "develop a better fit between people's needs, skills, and values" (p. 9). As compared with the structural frame, the human resources frame dispenses with prescribed, formal, and narrow organizational roles and encourages personal and professional growth, as well as relationships beyond formal organizational structures (p. 9). The human resources frame "starts with the fundamental premise that organizations are inhabited by individuals who have needs, feelings, and prejudices," as well as "skills and limitations" (p. 15). And again in contrast with the structural frame, "the key to effectiveness is to tailor organizations to people" by defining "an organizational form that enables people to get the job done feeling good about what they are doing" (p. 15).
- Naturally, the *political frame* borrows heavily from political science theory (p. 15). The political frame "views organizations as arenas in which different interest groups compete for power and scarce resources. Conflict is everywhere because of the differences in needs, perspectives, and life-styles

among various individuals and groups. Bargaining, negotiation, coercion, and compromise are all part of everyday organizational life. Coalitions form around specific interests and changes as issues come and go" (p. 15). The political frame, in contrast with the hierarchical nature of the structural frame, would suggest that "problems arise because power is concentrated in the wrong places" or, in contrast with the human resources frame, "because it is so broadly dispersed that nothing gets done" (p. 15).

- Last, the *symbolic frame* is based in "social and cultural anthropology" (p. 15). Whereas the other frames are built upon "assumptions of rationality" (p. 15), the symbolic frame recognizes "the limited ability of managers to create organizational cohesion through power or rational design" (p. 10), as "organizations are cultures that are propelled more by rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes, and myths than by rules, policies, and managerial authority" (p. 15). And as such, leaders "rely on images, drama, magic, and sometimes even luck or the supernatural to bring some semblance of order to organizations" (p. 10). Using symbols, the organization becomes theater, with participants assuming the roles of "actors" engaged in "drama" (p. 16), allowing "outside audiences" to form "impressions based on what they see occurring on stage" (p. 16). However, "problems arise when actors play their parts badly, when symbols lose their meanings, when ceremonies and rituals lose their potency" (p. 16).

Cumulatively, the four frames can contradict and complement each other, providing a multifaceted means of analysis and interpretation. To this end, Bowman and Deal have outlined a series of assumptions for each of the four frames, which will be integrated into the following discussion.

Structure

A foundational examination of general education can primarily be understood using Bolman and Deal's (2008) *structural frame*: "*Organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives*" (p. 47; italics added). One theorist articulated that the goal of higher education is "the development of critical intelligence on the part of students—the honing of critical and analytical skills with respect to competing belief and value systems; to prepare students for entry into the job market or the 'world of work'; to transform society and its dominant institutions; the transmission and/or acquisition of a prescribed body of classical knowledge; to provide students with those skills required to make informed value judgments—whether moral, religious, social, political, or economic; and to develop the potential of the unique individual as a 'whole person'"

(Riley, 1980, p. 300). On a most rudimentary and pragmatic level, colleges and universities exist to educate students through the successful completion of courses in varying proportions of prescribed and elected, and specialized and/or general course offerings. The completion of these courses should holistically demonstrate a given student's overall academic mastery, or at least perseverance, subsequently resulting in a conferred degree or certificate.

Clearly, general education has broad postgraduate applications (e.g., instilling the virtues of lifelong learning, "civic responsibility," and "full self-realization" [Louis, 1981, p. 31]), but it also has particularly pragmatic purposes for many students. Often students arrive at a college or university as first-year students academically unprepared for what lies ahead. General education courses are "designed . . . to compensate for the uncertain and inconsistent results of high school training in the United States" (Stearns, 2002, p. 44). For this reason, some have emphasized the importance of completing a general education program within the first two years of the university experience (Hurdle, 1981, p. 193). Particularly when it is fully integrated into the curriculum of the major, some (Wehlburg, 2010) have suggested that general education helps students "develop the skills and range of interests that will enable them to take best advantage of their whole college experience" (p. 10). General education also helps students "appreciate a variety of issues, . . . think independently and critically, and . . . learn independently, outside as well as within their ultimate area of specialization" (Stearns, 2002, p. 44). It provides the student the opportunity not only "to explore a variety of academic disciplines" before selecting a specialized major but also "to better assess his own interests in light of his talents and abilities" (Hurdle, 1981, p. 193). There is also an exploratory and dimensional aspect of general education, where students are exposed to "subject areas and methods previously unfamiliar to them or gain access to new insights in fields they thought they had covered, and perhaps dismissed, in high school" (Stearns, 2002, p. 47). Furthermore, some have suggested that the general education curriculum has aims to address the whole person in preparation for learning: "General education enables people to see clearly, to have the ability to examine issues and people as objectively as possible, without bias or prejudice, preconceptions or stereotypes; to examine nature and natural phenomena with complete freedom. It means having the vision to see complexly, recognizing nuances" (Louis, 1981, p. 34).

"*Suitable forms of coordination and control ensure that diverse efforts of individuals and units mesh*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47; italics added). With the countless opportunities to specialize in disciplines, the general education curriculum establishes the "architecture" or the "body of organized knowledge" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 4) for the breadth of required courses and the

"interconnections" (Leskes, Miller, & AAC&U, 2005, p. 2) to the specialized majors for the depth. General education in some form is required for more than 85 percent of the colleges and universities in the United States (Hachtmann, 2012, p. 16), serving as a compact among students, faculty, and administrators and the most tangible manifestation of an institution's educational values: "An intentional approach to general education, therefore, would assure that this important core of learning, shared by all students no matter their areas of concentration, reflects what is distinctive about the institution: its educational philosophy, culture, values, history, and student body" (Leskes et al., 2005, p. 2).

In the absence of "one pure" (Patil & Toombs, 1982, p. 235), universally accepted general education program, the contemporary general education curriculum has taken many structural forms across universities and colleges. One study defined and outlined a taxonomy of six, distinct models of general education (Hurtado, Astin, & Dey, 1991, p. 142). The *diverse offerings* model "lacks requirements and includes a variety of curriculum offerings"; the *personalized* or *individualized* model requires the student to "acquire and take personal charge of the knowledge base to pursue his or her own academic interests"; the *integrative* or *interdisciplinary* model requires students "to take courses encouraging interdisciplinary thought and activities that integrate course work and experience"; the *structured curriculum* model "is characterized by low flexibility in course selections and testing requirements"; the *interdisciplinary core* model explicitly requires a core curriculum of interdisciplinary courses; and last, the *major-dominated* model has explicitly required coursework, and "courses taken outside the major are determined primarily by each student's academic department" (p. 143). Other theorists have developed a number of competing taxonomies. A 2009 study posited "four models of general education," identified as "*traditional liberal arts*, *core distribution areas*, *cultures and ethics*, and *civic/ utilitarian*", and found the core distribution areas model to be the most common (Brint, Proctor, Murphy, Turk-Bicakci, & Hanneman, 2009, p. 614; italics added). Other researchers note the unique existence of a multidisciplinary curriculum based on a group of "core texts" (Warner & Koeppel, 2009, p. 241) but do not describe its application.

The diverse array of general education models do not fully account for all the varieties and iterations of general education curriculum. Even within these theoretical taxonomies, colleges and universities prescribe various proportions of general and specialized courses on an institutional basis. Considering that "institutions are expected to instill both a breadth and depth of knowledge" (Hurdle, 1981, p. 191), general education serves as the broad "countervailing force" to the specialized "dominance of the major"—a "countermajor" of sorts (Scott, 1981, p. 30). The overall average of required general education courses

held relatively steady from 1989 to 2000, fluctuating around forty-seven semester credit hours, or 38 percent of the total courses needed to complete a bachelor's degree (Johnson, Ratcliff, & Gaff, 2004, p. 15). While the overall number of credit hours has been relatively stable, the makeup and balance of the disciplines within general education has varied often due to the "exhortations, expectations, beliefs, and demands" (Toombs, Amey, & Chen, 1991, p. 116) regarding the inclusion of one discipline, perspective, or skill over another. And as noted, "no institution can begin to accommodate them all, even if this were desirable" (p. 112). The contemporary general education curriculum is largely made up of disciplines from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences (p. 106); however, there are many other components. From 2008 to 2009, researchers surveyed 433 chief academic officers (or designated representatives) of AAC&U member institutions and found that their corresponding general education curricula also featured "global courses" (60 percent), "first-year seminars" (58 percent), "diversity courses" (56 percent), "interdisciplinary courses" (51 percent), "civic learning or engagement activities" (38 percent), "service learning opportunities" (38 percent), and "experiential learning opportunities" (36 percent) (Hart Research Associates, 2009, p. 3). And "nearly half of institutions (49 percent) are using at least one of these approaches" (p. 3). Traditional and rudimentary skills courses are also a fixture of contemporary general education curricula, including mathematics, English, composition, speech (Brint et al., 2009, p. 634), foreign language, rhetoric (Toombs et al., 1991, p. 106), critical thinking, and computer literacy (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 21).

"*Problems arise and performance suffers from structural deficiencies*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47; italics added). In the "absence of a commanding concept, a preeminent design, a coherent group of values, or a specific body of knowledge" (Patil & Toombs, 1982, p. 235), questions of rigor (Stearns, 2002, p. 46) and overall cohesion (Irvin, 1990, p. 375) arise. Critics have suggested that colleges and universities have simply abandoned any "pretense of subscribing to a controlling curricular vision for the general or liberal education of its freshmen and sophomores" (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 912). Without course rigor, and a cohesive and coherent structure, the overall responsibility of gaining a broad foundation of knowledge rests upon the students themselves (Stearns, 2002, p. 45). Moreover, an effective general education program relies on an individual student's ability to anticipate what courses will be needed before beginning a specialty or to intuitively know what constitutes a cohesive general education program. "Armed with a distribution formula" (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 912) or a "shopping list," students are not "crafting a program" (Stearns, 2002, p. 44) to address their intellectual or educational deficiencies but are, rather, cobbling together a collection of courses that can be quickly and easily navigated through

to get to their major area of study (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 912). In fairness, most institutions will require or at least encourage students to seek guidance from an adviser or faculty mentor; however, at least some decision making resides with the student (Gaff, 1982, p. 192).

History

"Curricular history is American history and therefore carries the burden of revealing the central purposes and driving directions of American society" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 15). Bolman and Deal's (2008) *human resources frame* can be helpful in analyzing the origins and transformation of the general education curriculum: "*Organizations exist to serve human needs rather than the reverse*" (p. 122; italics added). The contemporary education curriculum of today bears very little resemblance to the curriculum of colonial colleges and universities. Institutions offered a single, "unified" (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 3) curriculum for all students, as the option to specialize in a major or choose electives simply did not exist. The professors, as well, lacked specialization, and the aim of the curriculum was simply to educate students into being well-rounded, productive, "cultured [gentlemen]" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 7), ready to take their place in society: "Students took a predetermined set of courses as they prepared for their future, and these courses were decided by the faculty. The set of courses was focused on the classics and was considered appropriate for a young man from a privileged background. This early approach to higher education was coherent because all students took essentially the same courses" (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 4). And such a simple and straightforward model sufficed to prepare students for nearly one hundred years. Upon graduation, students would move into professions as "doctors, lawyers, and clergymen . . . by way of apprenticeship or education in professional schools that were coequal with the colleges" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 7).

"*When the fit between individual and the organization is poor, one or both suffer. Individuals are exploited or exploit the organization—or both become victims*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 122; italics added). During the mid-nineteenth century, colleges and universities began to embrace a wider educational mission, one with "a new emphasis . . . to prepare individuals for a variety of vocations" (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 3). The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 funded the creation of one college or university in each of the thirty-four states, primarily "focused on agriculture and the mechanic arts" (p. 5). To an extent, the federal government, through the act, initiated curricular change, reshaping the higher education landscape with direct funding and promotion of the applied, vocational disciplines (p. 5). In 1869, Harvard University president Charles Eliot created the first elective system, giving students the opportunity

to "individualize their undergraduate study" (p. 4). In 1876, taking cues from research-driven, German curricular models, Johns Hopkins University opened a research-oriented graduate school, which fostered "faculty specialization and an increase in the overall knowledge base" (p. 4). Within such a research-centered environment, faculty sought to disseminate their findings through specialized course offerings (p. 4) and research. Subsequently, "the concept of a unified or general education began to lose its attraction" (p. 5) among students and faculty. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the confluence of emerging disciplines (p. 5) and their vocationalization (p. 4) led to the creation of specialized majors and electives. With the elective model, students were able to "choose courses that fit their specific interests and needs, departments could grow as more students took courses from a specific area, and the range of the course offerings increased dramatically" (p. 4). The model proved popular, as "students did not want to be educated all in the same way . . . taking the same courses" (p. 5). The single curriculum was a "poor" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 122) fit for both students and faculty; and as a result colleges and universities changed dramatically.

The elective model and the vast proliferation of discipline specialization benefited students and faculty alike; the "elective system offered many options for students to choose from, and it allowed the faculty to teach courses within their specific discipline (and increase research productivity)" (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 4). Throughout the early twentieth century, this shift, coupled with the demotion of Latin, Greek, and the classics (Stevens, 2001, p. 166), redefined the structure of the baccalaureate curriculum (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 4), challenged the overall integrity of the baccalaureate degree, and eventually gave rise to the general education curriculum: "There was a belief that overspecialization had occurred and students were not receiving a coherent and integrated education" (p. 6). At Harvard, Charles Eliot's successor, Abbot Lawrence Lowell, implemented a program of required, introductory courses across many disciplines, including "biological sciences, physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities," which has been cited as the beginning of the general education movement (p. 5). This "mixture of required courses and limited choice within groupings of closely related disciplines defined the general education 'model'" (Riley, 1980, p. 298) and was "widely" (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 5) replicated throughout "most colleges and universities in the 1950's" (Riley, 1980, p. 298). In 1945, Harvard issued the report *General Education in a Free Society*, also known as the *Red Book*, which codified the aims of general education in relation to specialized, disciplinary curriculum, mandating that "general education should be one-third of the overall baccalaureate program so that students did not overspecialize in a single content area" (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 6).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the structure of general education was further transformed by an ever-diversifying population of students and faculty. Specifically beneficial to "women and students from under-represented populations" (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 7), the Higher Education Act of 1965 expanded access to colleges and universities through increased direct, federal funding, as well as the creation of additional scholarships and low-interest student loans. This more diverse and inclusive student body "reacted to the general education programs and insisted that it reflect the perspectives of all students" (p. 7). However, with such expansion, many critics argued that the structural concept of the general curriculum was strained and distorted, resulting in many calls for curriculum reform (Hurtado et al., 1991, p. 133) throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Brint et al., 2009, p. 623). A 1977 report, titled *Missions of the College Curriculum*, by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found the state of general education curriculum to be a "disaster area" (p. 7). And not long after the publication of the report, "Harvard redesigned its 'core curriculum,' and hundreds of college committees scrambled to stitch together curricula that had come undone through the 1960s and 1970s, if they had ever been sound in the first place" (Klein, 1985, p. 327).

The latter part of the twentieth century could be characterized as a collision of values, pitting Bolman and Deal's *structural* frame against the *human resources* frame. One side, based in the traditions of "colonial colleges, as modernized under the influence of the English and Scottish universities" (Brint et al., 2009, p. 609), argued in favor of breadth, structure, organization, and the traditional liberal arts; whereas the other side, based in nineteenth-century German research and scholarship traditions (Rudolph, 1977, p. 7), argued in favor of specialization and choice, as well as perceived opportunities for social and economic mobility through vocationalism and specialized majors. It has been suggested that "here in the United States we continue to be attracted and confused by two radically different traditions" (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 912), but in practical terms, the traditional liberal arts only thrive in elite, private colleges and universities (Brint et al., 2009, p. 609) and only tentatively persist within the general education requirements of most public colleges and universities (Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, & Levy, 2005, p. 159).

Contemporary Criticism

To generalize, criticism of the general education curriculum has largely concentrated on questions of the lack of rigor, cohesion, and coherence—with the lack of coherence often being the product of the absence of cohesion. "*Organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47;

italics added), and rigor should be chief among the goals and objectives of colleges and universities. Some critics have suggested that general education courses are "watered down" (Irvin, 1990, p. 372), which ultimately serves to encourage student "passivity and dependency" and extinguish any nascent, engaged, or independent intellectual curiosity or interest (Riley, 1980, p. 298). Others have suggested that the absence of rigor simply graduates students who lack the qualities of an educated individual: "a broad span of knowledge; skills to communicate clearly, to think logically and critically, and to get along with different kinds of people; the capacity to work independently and as a part of a team to solve problems" (Gaff, 1989, p. 11). Some have articulated rigor in terms of belonging to an established "intellectual community," where members possess a "language of ideas" and adhere to a "collective integrity" (Wallace, 1983, p. 258). As a practical observation, others have suggested that the absence of rigor can be pinpointed to simple economics. While general education constitutes "the great bulk of introductory level offerings" (Irvin, 1990, p. 379), it is commonly taught within large classroom or auditorium settings, with the "highest student-faculty ratio" (Gaff, 1989, p. 19), by the least committed (Klein, 1985, p. 327), "weakest" (Gaff, 1989, p. 19), and most inexpensive faculty (Irvin, 1990, p. 379). And as a result, the overall implication, as perceived by students and faculty, is that the general education curriculum is not "held in esteem by the powers of the university or state" (p. 379). Ultimately, students and faculty likely "view general education as a 'distraction' keeping them from the 'important stuff' encountered in major field courses" (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2).

"*Organizations work best when rationality prevails over personal agendas and extraneous pressures*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47; italics added). Elective and distributed models, in varying degrees, encourage or at least accommodate "personal agendas" (p. 47) and specialization by design. And "in an age that encourages and even admires specialization, the name 'general education' itself is not particularly advantageous. The connotations of 'general' include a superficiality that is an anathema to academia" (Irvin, 1990, p. 372). But with such encouraged specialization, many concerns regarding the cohesion and the subsequent coherence (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 909; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2; Wallace, 1983, p. 259)—also known as the "*conceptual unity*" (Toombs et al., 1991, p. 112)—of the general education curriculum have been noted. Conceptual unity can be judged within the general education curriculum itself (Irvin, 1990, p. 372; Riley, 1980, p. 298), the context of the whole bachelor's degree (Toombs et al., 1991, p. 112), and its overall connections with the various specialized, discipline curricula (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2). And through these comparisons, many have found that general education has "little or no thought given to relationships among bodies of knowledge" (Riley, 1980, p. 298) and is an independent "parallel"

(Fuess & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2), a "segment" (Toombs et al., 1991, p. 112), or some "discrete bits of knowledge" (Gaff, 1982, p. 192). And the overall absence of conceptual unity has led many critics to ponder the relevancy of general education altogether (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2). Other critics have deferred questions of conceptual unity and posited that perhaps "knowledge is so diffuse, so various, growing so rapidly that there is no longer any common core which every student should be expected to know" (Irvin, 1990, p. 376).

"*When the fit between individual and the organization is poor, one or both will suffer: individuals will be exploited or will seek to exploit the organization, or both*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 122; italics added). It has been noted that "students select an institution for many reasons other [than] the quality of its general education" (Irvin, 1990, p. 378). And if critics of consumerism in higher education are to be believed, students are simply viewing general education courses as interchangeable (Klein, 1985, p. 327; Rudolph, 1977, p. 7) "stepping stones" (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 910) on the way to a vocational "certification" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 15). These vocationalized attitudes have been further exasperated by the demands of the professional discipline accrediting agencies (Irvin, 1990, p. 380) and specialized discipline departments (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 910), which both mandate prescribed general education requirements (Irvin, 1990, p. 380). Within these elective models, some have suggested that the balance of power has shifted too far in the favor of students (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 7; Harris, 2006, p. 192), placing "students, especially [lower-division] undergraduates, in the position of solely determining what is valued in the academic experience, without the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings necessary for making the proper decisions" (p. 192). Not only has such power reshaped the experience of the individual student, but some critics have noted that patterns of student preference have changed course, program, and degree offerings to be more vocationally oriented (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 7). Some have even gone so far as to suggest that "the education of the whole student [has been] increasingly left to chance" (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 912).

Revision and Reform

"Intentional change is a political act and curricular reform is no exception" (Leskes et al., 2005, p. 3). In the latter part of the twentieth century, attempts at general education curricular revision and reform sought to address and counterbalance the prevalence of consumerism, as well as the deficiencies of rigor, cohesion, and coherence (Rudolph, 1977, p. 15). And so, it is tempting to view the historical changes in the general education curriculum from the founding of Harvard up to the latter part of the twentieth century as an evolving progression

of counterbalances, teetering between prescriptive and elective models of general education (Irvin, 1990, p. 372). In the broad historical context, general education curricular reform and revision "[have] been constant, conscious and unconscious, gradual and sudden, accidental and intentional, uneven and diverse, imaginative and pedestrian" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 5). Recent revisions and reforms have been comparatively modest in their impact and scope, which might lead to a false impression that the matter of general education has been relatively settled. However, the never-ending presence of reform and revision (Gaff, 1989, p. 14; Rudolph, 1977, p. 6) would serve as support that general education is sensitive to influence. A positive analysis might characterize the frequency of reform and revision as "evidence of vitality" (Patil & Toombs, 1982, p. 236) or view general education as a "remarkably vital organism" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 6).

The overwhelming majority of institutions revised their general education curriculum at some point in the 1990s or were in the process of revision or reform in 2000. A 2000 survey of 278 chief academic officers from baccalaureate-granting and AAC&U member institutions found that 6 percent of the respondents reported that their general education curriculum was most recently revised prior to 1979, 16.5 percent in the 1980s, and 74 percent in the 1990s (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 10). A little over 96 percent of the officers reported that their institutions were currently in the process of revising their general education curricula or were slated to be in the following year (p. 12). Similar rates have been recorded in a 2009 iteration of the same basic survey (Hart Research Associates, 2009, p. 2).

In an examination of the types of contemporary changes made to the general education curriculum, a 1990 survey of 305 chief academic officers from institutions that had made changes sometime in the 1980s found that 68 percent of the responding officers reported "changing the distribution system, mainly by adding requirements, tightening them, and making them more specific" (Gaff & Wasescha, 1991, p. 52). To this end, 64 percent of these institutions began to require "freshman or senior seminars," and 52 percent increased the amount of interdisciplinary, "core" courses required (p. 52). Within this decade, other thematic changes were noted, such as writing across the curriculum, critical thinking, global studies, cultural pluralism, ethics and values, gender issues, and computer literacy (p. 55).

In the open-ended responses of the 2000 survey (Johnson et al., 2004), 54 percent of the chief academic officers "cited achieving greater curricular coherence or reducing curricular fragmentation as the primary reason for reforming the general education program" (p. 24). And on a reliability-measurement question, 48 percent of the officers also reported that their general education curricula were "failing to meet student or faculty needs and therefore in need of

change" (p. 24). In terms of campus attitudes to general education, 99.6 percent of the respondents reported that "their institution placed a higher priority on general education in 2000 than it did ten years earlier" (p. 10); and the officers estimated that 53 percent of their faculty and 21 percent of their students held similar views within the same period (p. 10). Within the survey, officers broadly described these shifts as continuous but "largely incremental," as opposed to "a one-time comprehensive overhaul event" (p. 12). Contemporary general education reform and revision has been varied and active; however, from a historical perspective, these changes have been gradual, narrow, and piecemeal.

"*Problems arise and performance suffers from structural deficiencies, which can be remedied through analysis and restructuring*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47; italics added). Evidence of the creation of formal learning outcomes and student learning assessments for the sake of guiding general education curricular reform and revision are common. The aforementioned 2009 study (Hart Research Associates, 2009) found that 65 percent of the surveyed chief academic officers reported that their institutions had articulated learning outcomes for "all" of their departments, and 98 percent reported them for "some" (p. 3) of their departments; however, only 30 percent of the institutions were measuring student learning outcomes (p. 6). But studies have not always found a relationship between general education curricular reform and general education assessments based on learning objectives: "Only 15% of institutions had assessed student learning outcomes at the time they were implementing changes in general education, and 25% were making curricular changes without the guidance of student assessment information. Another 18% were assessing student outcomes but not implementing any changes to their general education program" (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 17). And by the mid-1970s, twenty states had implemented "minimal competency testing for graduating seniors" (Brint et al., 2009, p. 624): "During the 1980s and 1990s, more than half of the states introduced some form of performance funding linked to outcomes assessments, and 13 directly linked annual funding to institutional performance measures" (p. 624). Within the 1990 survey (Gaff & Wasescha, 1991), chief academic officers also reported perceived increases in rates of "faculty renewal," "institutional identity," "public relations, visibility," a "sense of community," their "general education budget," student perseverance, "admissions," "fund-raising," and faculty compensation as the result of "small" and "large" changes in their general education curriculum (p. 52). While in 2007 the AAC&U articulated and recommended learning outcomes for the general education curriculum (National Leader Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise, 2007, p. 3), the practice of using the assessment of student learning outcomes to guide general education revision and reform has been inconsistent. Optimistically speaking, "what is happening

is that a major share of faculty members and sensitive academic leaders are struggling, and largely succeeding, to keep up with a society that is not only changing rapidly but also is unsure about where that change is leading" (Toombs et al., 1991, p. 117).

Internal Politics

"*Coalition members have enduring differences in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 194; italics added). While the general education curriculum is "locked into a debate between one group that claims there is no core and another that claims there is indeed a core if only they could determine exactly of what it consists" (Irvin, 1990, p. 375), the overall responsibility for and leadership of general education is often tentative or piecemeal, if present at all. Traditionally, the leadership of general education has primarily been the domain of full-time, tenured faculty (Patil & Toombs, 1982, p. 237); however, many colleges and universities have created administrative-level general education leadership or coordinator positions (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 8). After all, "it is a truth . . . in academia that a program seeking legitimacy must be in want of its own administration" (Irvin, 1990, p. 371). But with the centralization of responsibility and leadership into a single administrative unit, critics have recorded concerns regarding the operational costs of the group (p. 371), given that general education has oft been characterized as unfunded or at least underfunded (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2; Stearns, 2002, p. 47). Others have pointed to concerns regarding the complete consolidation of power of general education decisions (Irvin, 1990, p. 376), as well as a potential conflict of interest between an institution's economic well-being and its general education curriculum's "marketability" (Hachtmann, 2012, p. 28). However, placing sole responsibility and leadership of general education in the hands of faculty has historically been problematic as well.

Some have suggested that faculty are uniquely qualified to manage general education, as "the guardians of the liberal ideals that are the essence of general education" (Klein, 1985, p. 328). But at most institutions, general education courses are primarily taught by part-time faculty, graduate assistants, newly appointed assistant professors, or reassigned former subject specialists (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2; Irvin, 1990, p. 373; Stearns, 2002, p. 47; Wehlburg, 2010, p. 7). The *structural frame* argument for increased efficiency and enhanced performance through the "*specialization and appropriate division of labor*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47; italics added) would certainly apply. However, these faculty groups are often the least expensive and experienced teachers (Irvin, 1990, p. 373) and, more importantly, predominately hold non-decision-making

positions within their institutions. In a sense, the faculty segment that is the most involved in the provision of general education is the least professionally actualized, positioned, and sanctioned with authority to be responsible for its success. Consider the tenured and tenure-track faculty: Some will be involved in general education revision and reform, and some will publicly protest the declines in general education rigor (Hachtmann, 2012, p. 27); however, "most do not read the literature of general education, do not contribute to its scholarship, attend its conferences, [or] engage in its dialogue" (Irvin, 1990, p. 374). Furthermore, specialized faculty often lack "a cohesive philosophy of general education" (p. 374), "are ignorant of the contents and methods of general education" (Klein, 1985, p. 328), and more significantly, "view general education from the perspective of their departmental interests rather than from any conception of general education as an autonomous program with its own goals and principles" (Irvin, 1990, p. 374). Ultimately, specialized faculty are "more committed to their discipline and department than to their institution" (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 7); and unlike general education, specialization has historically been systematically incentivized through faculty award structures: tenure, promotion, compensation, support, prestige, funding, and so on (Gaff, 1989, p. 14; Hachtmann, 2012, p. 26; Irvin, 1990, p. 379; Wehlburg, 2010, p. 7). At some institutions, the faculty reward structures disincentivize not only participation in general education activities (Irvin, 1990, p. 379) but teaching altogether (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 910; Fuess & Mitchell, 2011, p. 2) in favor of research and grantsmanship. Moreover, "many faculty members feel greater allegiances to outside organizations than to the university that pays their salaries" (Irvin, 1990, p. 379), such as professional organizations, social groups, governmental entities, or "national learned societies" (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 910).

Bolman and Deal (2008) noted that the "*most important decisions involve allocating scarce resources—who gets what,*" and that "*scarce resources and enduring differences put conflict at the center of day-to-day dynamics and make power the most important asset*" (p. 195; italics added). With such pronounced tenured and tenure-track faculty apathy to the administration of general education, it would seem that administrators or non-tenure-track faculty would have seized the opportunity to claim it as their own. However, departmental funding at most institutions has historically been the result of "student credit hour production" (Hachtmann, 2012, p. 26), where a portion of tuition revenues is channeled directly back to the departments that provided the course. As mentioned earlier, general education credit hours make up approximately 38 percent, or forty-seven credit hours, of the total courses required for an undergraduate degree (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 15). And though revenue from matriculated student credit hour production is profitable, most disciplines, particularly those

that do not graduate many students, have come to rely on their inclusion in the distribution requirements for sustaining departmental revenue (Brint et al., 2009, p. 608), protecting and encouraging further specialization (Klein, 1985, p. 332). A study of curricular change from 1915 to 2000 shows that while the total number of undergraduate degrees has nearly doubled, "almost every field which constituted the old liberal arts core of the undergraduate college was in absolute decline as measured by numbers of graduates . . . except those closely connected to health careers" (Brint et al., 2005, p. 159).

"*Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining and negotiation among competing stakeholders jockeying for their own interests*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 195; italics added). In a sense, the general education curriculum has come to represent a competitive stalemate between departments for credit hour production revenues, often at the expense of rigor, cohesion, and coherence (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 909; Irvin, 1990, p. 379; Klein, 1985, p. 329; Wallace, 1983, p. 259). Critics have suggested that this "illiberal" (Klein, 1985, p. 328) political dynamic not only has enhanced the power of departments (Cadwallader, 1983, p. 909; Gaff, 1982, p. 195), and their related disciplines, but has thwarted broad curricular reform and revision (Brint et al., 2009, p. 634; Gaff, 1989, p. 12; Gano-Phillips et al., 2011, p. 66). Others have recorded examples of general education sabotage, where "faculty politicians will often scuttle it [reform] with debilitating amendments, clever gerrymandering, or delaying tactics" (Gaff, 1989, p. 12). As another example, in a survey of 139 chief academic officers from institutions that had "undertaken at least a review of general education offerings," respondents were asked to identify two of the largest "obstacles to reform" from a list of seven possibilities (Klein, 1985, p. 329); 58 percent of the respondents chose "turfism," 40 percent chose "faculty resistance," and 30 percent chose "competition from majors and specializations" (p. 329). Critics have suggested that "we have allowed general education to be structured around the interests of faculty members rather than around informed decisions about what is in the best interests of the undergraduate education of our students" (Irvin, 1990, p. 377): "Perhaps there is no [general education] curriculum either, only an assumption of burdens and discrete programs for carrying them out: an accidental compromise between the only partially understood past and the unanticipated future" (Rudolph, 1977, p. 15).

External Pressure

The reform and revision of the general education curriculum has not been exclusively limited to the political dynamics of an institution's internal actors, as a number of external groups have encouraged or mandated the revision and

reform of the contemporary curriculum (Brint et al., 2009, p. 632; Toombs et al., 1991, p. 108). Of the publicly controlled AAC&U member institutions, 83 percent of the respondent chief academic officers identified one or more external factors that had affected their institution's general education curriculum (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 22). However, the researchers also found that even though the "sources of influence varied greatly across institutions . . . no single external factor that was identified affected a majority of institutions" (p. 22). External influence on the general education curriculum originates from many sources, including regional accreditation agencies, social and political movements, state government policies, and economic market forces, as well as practical matters such as intercollegiate, transfer articulation agreements (Irvin, 1990, p. 378; Johnson et al., 2004, p. 22). These influences span across several of Bolman and Deal's assumptions and are not seated in a single frame.

"*Problems arise and performance suffers from structural deficiencies, which can be remedied through analysis and restructuring*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47; italics added). The aforementioned 2000 study (Johnson et al., 2004) found that 38 percent of the chief academic officers cited regional accrediting associations' standards as an impetus of curricular change, representing "the most frequently cited external influence on general education, regardless of institutional type or control" (p. 22). While regional accreditation associations lack an "explicit statement about what the general education curriculum should consist of" (Warner & Koeppel, 2009, p. 242), student learning outcomes are mandated by all of the U.S. accreditors (Wehlburg, 2010, p. 8). And while the outcomes are firm, the methods are not prescribed, leaving institutions the flexibility to develop and implement a curriculum that satisfies their institutional curricular mission while meeting appropriate regional standards for degrees. In a sense, accreditors act as the ultimate arbiter of general education by holding colleges and universities accountable to external oversight (Brint et al., 2009, p. 624) and by providing a comparative means for "institutional self-study and peer-evaluation" (Lopez, 1999, p. 46). Sometimes this influence has served as a force for improvements, but it has also been cited as a source of "real tension" (Stearns, 2002, p. 47) for institutional autonomy, as well as departmental and disciplinary authority. Ultimately, "regional accrediting agencies have the capacity to require improvements in specific areas of institutional capacity and institutional effectiveness as a precondition for accreditation" (Brint et al., 2009, p. 624) or reaccreditation.

"*Organizations exist to serve human needs (rather than the reverse)*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 122; italics added). Some have argued that the general education curriculum is "socially constructed" and simply a

reflection of the institution's "students, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders" (Hachtmann, 2012, p. 20). The influx of minority, female, and other "previously marginal groups" (Brint et al., 2009, p. 628) during the civil and women's rights era of the 1960s subsequently led to shifts in the general education curriculum to include disciplines and perspectives beyond "western societies and cultures" and "the dominant ethnic and economic groups within these societies" (Riley, 1980, p. 298). It is important to note that some of this diversification was encouraged and sponsored by external "social movement organizations, philanthropic foundations and advocacy organizations" (Brint et al., 2009, p. 628).

"*Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining and negotiation among competing stakeholders jockeying for their own interests*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 195; italics added). In a 2000 survey of 279 chief academic officers, 56 percent of the respondents indicated that a state governing board had influenced their general education curriculum, mostly by mandates to de-emphasize content in favor of emphasizing skills. State government boards have attempted to connect "institutional effectiveness" (Leskes et al., 2005, p. 1) to state financial support, due to "the perception that colleges and universities have not done enough to ensure that students are learning course materials and essential academic competencies" (Brint et al., 2009, p. 624). As mentioned earlier, in the 1980s and 1990s, twenty states had implemented "minimal competency testing for graduating seniors" (p. 624). And half of the states had introduced some form of a performance-based funding scheme, with thirteen states directly linking annual funding to learning outcomes (p. 624). The core of state governments' interest in institutional effectiveness is in part a check to ensure that public expenditures are being invested wisely; however, state governments are equally concerned with graduating a skilled workforce that will improve a given state's economic competiveness (Hachtmann, 2012, p. 16). Some observers have noted that this drive to stimulate economic development and competitiveness through colleges and universities has steadily increased over the years (Brint et al., 2005, p. 172; Weiland, 1989, p. 372), placing the value of broad, general education in jeopardy (Harris, 2006, p. 198) and leading to accusations of mission creep, "where institutional pursuits move colleges and universities away from or in contradiction to their traditional missions" (p. 187).

Unlike the other three frames, the *symbolic frame* does not have to be restrained by "rationality" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47). Colleges and universities are rife with "rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes, and myths" (p. 16) because when "*facing uncertainty and ambiguity, people create symbols to resolve confusion, find direction, and anchor hope and faith*" (p. 253; italics added). For instance, all students—those who seek to have a broad well-rounded

educational experience, those who focus their energies into a specialized discipline, and those who purposefully avoid rigor within their course of study—are awarded the same degree. The symbolic frame normalizes such varied experiences, in that "*activity and meaning are loosely coupled; events and actions have multiple interpretations as people experience life differently*" (p. 253; italics added). Colleges and universities trade on their perceived prestige; and so, the ability to revise and reform the general education curriculum has been predicated on an institution's reputation (Irvin, 1990, p. 377) and identity (Scott, 1981, p. 30). For some institutions, it has been critical to not disavow potential students, alumni, potential faculty and administrators, the surrounding community, state government officials, economic actors, and so on of any notions that the general education curriculum might be in need of revision or reformation: "*Events and processes are often more important for what is expressed than for what is produced. Their emblematic form weaves a tapestry of secular myths, heroes and heroines, rituals, ceremonies, and stories to help people find purpose and passion*" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 253; italics added). And as such, critics have assigned any number of aspirations to the general education curriculum: "General education has been perceived as a medicine to cure many ills, including overspecialization and vocationalism, to incite much virtue in areas such as civic responsibility, and to prepare individuals for full self-realization. In short, general education, done correctly (and there's the rub), enables colleges and universities to stand firmly behind the typical college catalogue claim that the college's program serves as a foundation for many professions, for life-long learning, for working with today's and tomorrow's technology" (Louis, 1981, p. 31).

Discussion

Using Bolman and Deal's *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* does not necessarily unearth any new or profound truths; however, it succeeds in providing a novel, guiding template to analyze and interpret such a vast and unwieldy topic as the general education curriculum. It would seem that the bulk of the historical and critical literature on general education easily fits within the *structural*, *human resources*, and *political* frames; this may be a reflection of what aspects of general education have been studied—or considered worth studying—thus far. And while the contemporary general education curriculum has been comparatively stable, it seems unlikely that its contemporary condition will persist, particularly in the current economic and political environment, favoring vocationalization. However, *Reframing Organizations* should still be able to accommodate these shifts.

NOTE

1. While general education is an integral component of a two-year associate's degree, the discussion will focus on the application of general education in terms of both privately and publicly controlled, not-for-profit, four-year, bachelor's degree–granting institutions in the United States. Also, throughout this article, the phrase "colleges and universities" will be inclusive, as making distinctions between the two institutional types does little to enhance the overall discussion of general education here.

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